

Shortgrass Country

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Page 10

The ground is sick in the Shortgrass Country. Livestock moving in the pastures stir up as much dust as trucks did last year. A parched odor is stifling the land. Only those too young to remember the drouth of the 50s can keep from worrying that another dry siege is at hand.

Trouble came so swiftly that no one had time to appeal to the government to come to the rescue. Ranchers have been too shorthanded to keep their gates latched. They couldn't have spared a messenger even if they'd had one. It wasn't a case of the lifeboat being overloaded. It was a situation in which about everyone except the captain had jumped ship.

As fast as the grass disappeared after frost, old man Samuel Morse himself couldn't have sent S.O.S.'s fast enough to summon aid. For all I know, some of the citizens may have tried screaming for help only to be choked down by the billowing dust. But only rank amateurs will unclinch their teeth during dry spells. I remember an old kid who lived over east of us who couldn't keep his yap shut in dry weather. When the doctors started to take his tonsils out, the nurses had to use an ice tea spoon to clear away the dirt.

Pouring feed on the barren ground has made stock winter better than was expected. The old cows in particular have been picking up enough rocks in their feed to take up a lot of the hollow places in their stomachs. Veterinarians have been claiming that some cattle were going to die from getting their rumens overfilled with pebbles and dirt. Cow and sheep doctors, you know, don't have to live with the thought that every four-legged creature we own except the saddle horses also has four big stomachs to fill. Livestock to them are merely valuable patients, not walking beggars who roam the hillsides thinking every step of how much feed they can chisel from their owners.

Cows could have eight stomachs and it wouldn't bother the veterinarians. As long as they can sell more bloat remedies, they'll advocate all the stomachs that could be fitted on an animal. You never heard of a human doctor fussing because people had rusty gall bladders or soured appendixes. Just try some day to find any sort of healer who doesn't wish that both man and beast had two of everything to go wrong. Kidney specialists are the enemy of the whole crowd.

Thirty odd days of 1971 have passed. Results released by a big national polling organization have already ruined any hope of Shortgrassers being happy in 1971. The pollsters revealed that folks making under the national average income were unhappier than the ones making over \$15,000 a year, it proved that dryland ranchers were going to be the saddest in the country.

I'd been noticing the herders weren't doing any ballerina toe whirls as the wool and mohair market found new bottom hole records. But without the supporting evidence of a poll, I'd never have thought one's happiness index was related to his economic index. I just figured the reason that the ranchers were acting so restless and uncomfortable was because they'd put on too many clothes this winter. I never would've guessed that working for survival wages was bothering them. Rich people, as long as I can remember, have been saying that poor people didn't have enough sense to know when they were well off. I suppose if they hadn't run that poll, I'd have gone through life thinking that ranchers were just as happy as bankers and lawyers.

Feed wagons are moving at a desperate pace. Newborn lambs look mighty feeble hitting the drouth scorched earth.

Shortgrassers can stand anything better than being out of grass and that's precisely what the challenge is today.